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[Review of: H. Hawkins (2014) For creative geographies: geography, visual arts and the making of worlds]

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Publication date

2014

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Antipode

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ferdinand, S. (2014). [Review of: H. Hawkins (2014) For creative geographies: geography, visual arts and the making of worlds]. *Antipode*, 2014(06).
https://radicalantipode.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/book-review_ferdinand-on-hawkins.pdf

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A Radical Journal of Geography

Harriet Hawkins, *For Creative Geographies: Geography, Visual Arts and the Making of Worlds*, New York: Routledge, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-415-63625-4 (cloth)

Approaching the wealth of contemporary experimental practices in which geography and art spar and fuse with one another, it would be easy to play them off against a straw-man vision of modern geography, fervently scientific and defined strictly against imaginative practice. But geography was never such a fossil, prime for artistic deconstruction or demystification. Reflections on continuities and variances with art have long figured in the discipline's intellectual history, the two field's parting of the ways continually tested and renegotiated, even intermittently refused.

These are important qualifications, and must be borne in mind in any broad assessment of geography's entanglements with art. Nevertheless, it seems that a spread and intensification of activities exploring the liminal terrain between geography and art has been gathering momentum since the 1960s, such that they now demand serious response from the discipline. For about ten years, cultural geographer Harriet Hawkins has enriched that response, researching and participating in the rush of disciplinary experiment and overlap that she crystallised with the term 'creative geographies'. The rubric is expansive, allowing us to see and think a unity, a space of interweaving practices and projects, in otherwise disparate manifestations of geography and art. The proliferation of artistic endeavours that extend into and often overtly engage with distinctly geographical concerns and procedures constitutes the prime subject of Hawkins's research, the yield of which has been collected into an impressive new book.

For Creative Geographies, in grappling with the conjunctures gathered in its title, takes its bearings from several rich, overlapping bodies of writing. Reading the formidable introductory framing and review of relevant work, it becomes apparent that the book must address two lacunae. Firstly, and as one would expect from such an interdisciplinary subject, the earlier literature is generally fragmented, often as local as the practices it addresses. Secondly, art-geography interactions have hitherto been analysed in the context of studies centred on specific themes (she mentions work on urban practice and globalisation, amongst other topics). Whatever the merits of these researches, they are primarily concerned with what artistic engagements with geography reveal about their chosen problematic, not with the engagements themselves.

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Given the limits to earlier research, *For Creative Geographies* is centrally concerned to assemble a synoptic conceptual schema within which particular art-geography experiments can be placed, and questions regarding their cumulative implications for the discipline posed. From art theorist Rosalind Krauss' (1986) writings on the 'expanded field' of postwar sculpture, Hawkins' derives "an imaginary of disciplinary fields—in this case art and geography—expanding toward one another" and enabling "productive intersections" (p.5). Although interested readers can find a shorter sketch of this Krauss-inspired conceptualisation excerpted in an issue of *Progress in Human Geography* from last year (see Hawkins 2013), in the book we see the formulation gather empirical substance as it plays out at length across a three-part structure.¹

The first third of the book explores experiments that test and stretch the disciplinary boundaries through which the fields of artistic and geographical practice are defined; the second explores the geographies of art's production and consumption; and the third addresses art and geography's common concern with embodiment and phenomenology. These sections are comprised of seven chapter-long analyses of concrete case studies: a geographically themed exhibition named '[Creative Compass](#)'; artist [Amy Houghton](#)'s attempt to recover and explore the practice of the neglected modern geographer Gertrude Benham through her ethnographic collection; the spatial significance of '[Breakdown](#)', Micheal Landy's famous disassemblage of his worldly possessions; the urban imaginary of photographer [Richard Wentworth](#); a community project of Annie Lovejoy's, and the related book '[insites](#)'; the affective responses provoked by a [Tomoko Takahashi](#) installation; and the geographical implications of [Ana Mendieta](#)'s photographed performances. Students of experimental forms of cartography and institutional critique, to mention one intriguing analysis, will be interested in the section on Angnès Poitevin-Navarre and Susan Stockwell's artistic reworkings of maps, which are presented in critical dialogue with the cartographies historically sponsored by their host institution, the Royal Geographical Society (p.40-49). Those concerned with radical geography or performance art, to mention a second, should note a discussion of Ana Mendieta's well known 'Silueta' series, in which the human outlines slowly fading into the environment come to constitute an non-Cartesian geography of dynamic assemblages of elements moving in and through subjects (p.229-230, 234). Closer to the pulse of *For Creative Geographies*, in my view, is

¹ Wytan Curnow (1999) also draws upon Krauss' notion of postwar art's expanded field in a brief account of the specific subfield of art-geography relations usually referred to as 'map art'.

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chapter five, which explores a project involving issues of residency, participation and site-specificity through Annie Lovejoy's 'Caravanserai'. Hawkins herself collaborated in the programme, which drew people living in and around a Cornwall campsite into collective creative practices that explored and reformed their common social environment.²

I isolate 'Caravanserai' as important because it brings us to the book's key gesture, which is not so much to survey present art-geography entanglements as to grapple with their cumulative thrust and coursing methodological-epistemological ramifications. Much of the work turns on identifying emergent practices that instance alternative conceptions of what geographical knowledge and practice might be like. A crucial statement on this transformatory potential in the conclusion suggests that "geography and art might not merely offer one field as a model or form of critique for the other, but rather could instead demand that we move beyond the existing horizons of both" (p.241). Corresponding to neither the discrete meaningful objects we routinely associate with art, nor the dispassionate description of regional specificity and process often associated with geography, 'Caravanserai' is rather an indeterminate form being collaboratively shaped through recognisably artistic, geographical and indeed social forms of experiment. As such, it stands very well for Hawkins's view that artistic experiment "has the potential to transform the field on which it is working", pushing beyond normative conceptions of geography to provide us with "possibilities...for experiencing and thinking the world differently" (p.12).

In grappling with the nascent possibilities being fostered by creative geographies and grounding a perspective adequate to them, Hawkins advances three 'core analytics': What 'work' or effects do these practices perform in the world? How do they engage with the socio-spatial relations that surround and include them? And, finally, what creative encounters with human subjects do they provoke? These analytics, which are variously pursued across the three parts of the book, lead our conception of creative geographies in a certain direction. On the artistic side of the ledger, they lean towards a present-tense, reception-orientated engagement with art, distributing creativity and pushing beyond the limiting authority of established iconographies. On the geographical side, they broadly privilege embodied experimental—and indeed experiential—engagements with environments and objects, often in a rather non-representational vein. Overall, emphasis falls not on what art

² See <http://www.annielovejoy.net/cgi-bin/showproject.pl?title=Caravanserai> (last accessed 2 June 2014).

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means, but rather on what Hawkins terms its active “liveliness”—the play of social-spatial relations and reactions precipitated by art’s being in the world (p.10).

Now of course one might choose to contest Hawkins’s choice of these particular emphases, arguing for another vision of where creative geographical practices are leading. From *Antipode*’s leftist perspective, for instance, we might notice that, whilst the book’s vision is radical in the sense that it foregrounds projects whose conceptions of geographical knowledge are often constitutively different from those prevailing in the discipline, Hawkins simultaneously pulls emphasis away from the specifically critical dimensions of alternative geographical endeavour. Readers who are especially invested in the disabused critique or correction of dominant geopolitical assumptions might not want to follow this particular strain of the book too closely, which is concerned to move beyond “aesthetics that look to disturb, expose, uncover or impose” towards more positive ground (p.164).

That we are able even to gesture towards a position on the broad import and trajectory of art-geography relations, however, is a testament to the remarkable work of synthesis and methodological trawl that Hawkins has achieved in manoeuvring discussion to that level. Overall, the book treats the limits and possibilities of creative geographies with compelling seriousness, and the scholarship is impressive throughout. The imaginative picture of ramifying art-geography entanglements established here will prove an indispensable frame of reference to those forming perspectives on the nascent field. *For Creative Geographies* looms large in my footnotes already.

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June 2014